

Extending Readers Theatre: A Powerful and Purposeful Match With Podcasting

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Audio recording enhances this popular strategy by giving permanency and a wide audience to student performance.

A group of six third graders huddle around the computer giggling as they determine what kind of introduction they want for their next Readers Theatre podcast. They have practiced this script every day this week and are now ready for Chase (pseudonym) to count them in. Sarah starts the recording program, Chase gives the signal, and they all sing the introductory music they have decided to add into their reading script work.

Chase holds the microphone close to each reader, and each speaks clearly and confidently into the microphone, connected to a classroom computer. The readers monitor their volume and timing by watching the sound waves that appear on the screen. When they finish, they listen to the recording and decide if it needs to be redone before saving it. Long pauses are deleted.

Other class members are engaged in their own reading or writing work, as this is not a one-time production. It is part of the regular rhythm of this classroom. Each group will have its turn.

Jessica, who started the year reading at a kindergarten level, has caught up with her peers, and her reading is indistinguishable from that of the other on-level readers in her group. In other second- or third-grade classes, the teacher may be holding the microphone as the rest of the class listens to the live performance, but the energy and excitement are the same. The students are reading a script they have practiced all week and recording their performance to a voice file that will be uploaded to a website later

that day. They know that by the time they get home, their family and friends will be able to enjoy their performance over and over again from any computer that is connected to the Internet.

As this classroom scene shows, we are no longer entering the 21st century—we are there, and often our students are ahead of us. In our quest to use and integrate current technology to enhance literacy instruction, we seek to match well-researched literacy strategies with technological tools that enhance the strategy and make it stronger. One such recent enhancement was to match the reading fluency strategy of repeated readings with the technology of podcasting.

Readers Theatre is an important tool that brings authenticity and engagement to the process of repeated readings, resulting in remarkable and measurable comprehension gains. When considering the power of Readers Theatre along with the auditory nature of podcasting, we set about to extend the Readers Theatre work of Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) and Griffith and Rasinski (2004) by investigating the following questions:

- Can we replicate the reading comprehension gains from previous Readers Theatre research using podcasted performances?
- How will the experience of podcasting Readers Theatre be qualitatively different from performances without the technology?

Readers Theatre: Proven Literacy Strategy

Repeated reading as a way to improve both fluency and comprehension is well established (Dowhower, 1987, 1991; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), but finding an

authentic purpose for this type of reading and rereading can be challenging. By providing a performance and an audience, Readers Theatre offers an authentic purpose for the kind of repeated practice required to become a fluent reader—especially for struggling readers (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999; Worthy, 2005; Worthy & Broaddus, 2000).

Teachers have found that implementing the practice of Readers Theatre as a strategy for improving fluency for as little as 10 weeks re-

sulted in consistent gains in comprehension of more than one year (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999). This 10-week time frame intrigued us. Because Griffith and Rasinski (2004) found these gains year after year, we used the same time frame for this study.

We share Martinez and colleagues' (1999) definition of Readers Theatre as an interpretive, voice-only performance. Performing readers use their voice to bring the characters to life without sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines, the inclusion of which would change this work from Readers Theatre to more traditional stage drama. The readers' goal is to expressively read a text so that the audience can visualize the story (Martinez et al., 1999).

A script and upcoming performance provide the context for purposeful reading and rereading (Coody, 1992), along with the elements of drama. Because the product of the performance is oral, volume, intonation, pitch, and timing are critical to supporting the listener's enjoyment, visualization, and understanding of a script. The use of these elements provides the demonstration of the readers' understanding of the text, as well.

With the expectation of drama and performance, readers begin to realize that reading is an activity that has an element of experimentation (Carrick, 2000). To portray a character's emotions, one requires a deep understanding of the plot and the character's goals and motives. Considering the audience in a performance reading compels the reader to engage in deeper analytical thought to make the story come alive so that the audience can envision it (Guzzetti, 2002).

Because of the expressive nature of Readers Theatre, the byproduct of this extensive fluency work

PAUSE AND PONDER

- What other ways can you think of to use podcasting to enhance learning and literacy?
- How can you match technology and literacy strategies to enhance the strength of both?
- What do you think of the authors' ideas about audio as a visual medium?

has been dramatic gains in reading comprehension (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999). Further, the social nature of being part of a cast of readers adds to the motivation to engage in reading and rereading the script (Busching, 1981).

Purposeful Matching: Powerful Technology That Enhances a Strong Literacy Strategy

When considering a powerful technology and literacy strategy match, our first consideration was to maintain the integrity of the literacy strategy while also creating something that was not there without the technology. In other words, we believe it is important to maintain the elements of the literacy strategy that have proven effective through the research, such as fluency and comprehension gains. Then we look for technology affordances that highlight the strategy strengths while adding a new dimension, so that the combination creates positive changes in the learning environment that were not possible without this pairing (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009).

Clearly, integrating technology for the sake of technology itself might result in initial engagement due to novelty, but the long-term effects would certainly wane. Kozma (1991) advocated selecting technology that is uniquely suited to the learning project at hand. Readers Theatre, as defined in this article, depends solely on the voice to convey meaning, and it is through the interpretive reading that students grow in their fluency and comprehension.

Because Readers Theatre has an auditory product, the technology match would need to capitalize on the auditory nature. Podcasting, as a purely aural medium, is an ideal means to authentically integrate technology, widen the audience for student readings, and maintain the integrity of Readers Theatre goals. Further, integrating this technology into students' reading work introduces and extends the concepts of new literacies that can be developed and learned through the use of technology (e.g., see Gee, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Richardson, 2006).

Podcasting uses audio files over the Internet, typically in mp3 format. Interested listeners subscribe to podcasts, which are typically distributed via Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. New podcasts in a feed are automatically sent to subscribers.

While podcasting has evolved to include video files, our research used only audio files for two reasons. First, as previously noted, Readers Theatre was originally conceived as an aural strategy, and maintaining the integrity of the strategy was important to us. We do not advocate turning Readers Theatre into traditional drama stage productions, which while engaging and serving of other purposes, can siphon time away from the real purpose of this strategy: to engage in dramatic, repeated reading. Stage dramas also take more classroom time and are often selective in who participates. By remaining true to the auditory nature of Readers Theatre, time spent on performance reading is the focus rather than making props, costumes, and sets. Second, recording audio

files is an inexpensive and easy process that is accessible to many teachers, even those who work in cash-strapped districts and those who are technology-shy. (See Figure 1 for an overview of the recording process.)

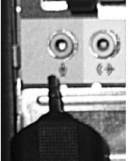
Methodology

Participants


Three elementary schools in a North Texas suburb were selected for this research. Two of the schools are Title I schools that also serve the district bilingual population and many English learners (ELs). (Refer to Table 1 for school demographics.)

One second-grade class and one third-grade class from each school were selected for this project based on teacher interest, for a total of six classes. All parents granted permission for their children to participate in the study and for their voices to be podcasted in their Readers Theatre groups. Approximately 100 students


Figure 1
Recording Process



1. Plug in any microphone into the pink connection on the back of the computer.




2. Open Audacity Software
Audacity is free audio recording software available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>



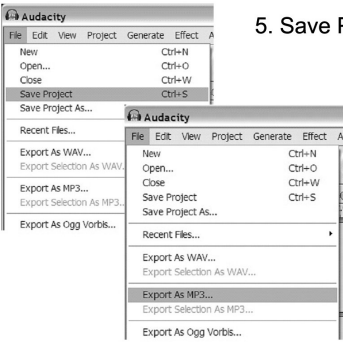
3. Click Record when ready

Tip: Keep microphone close - about 2 fingers away from mouth!



4. Click Stop when finished

5. Save Project, then...



Export as MP3

6. Fill in the details - These details will scroll while people are listening to the podcast

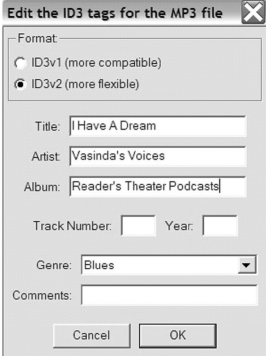


Table 1
School Demographics

| School | Male | Female | Free or reduced lunch | Black | Hispanic | White | Asian/Pacific Islander | English learner |
|--------|------|--------|-----------------------|-------|----------|-------|------------------------|-----------------|
| A | 51% | 49% | 53% | 24% | 29% | 44% | 3% | 20% |
| B | 51% | 49% | 60% | 15% | 42% | 37% | 6% | 40% |
| C | 52% | 48% | 13% | 8% | 12% | 72% | 8% | 7% |

Table 2
Struggling Student Demographics

| School | Male | Female | Black | Hispanic | White | English learner | Total per school |
|--------|------|--------|-------|----------|-------|-----------------|------------------|
| A | 10 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 12 |
| B | 5 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 10 |
| C | 9 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 13 |

participated in the project, including 35 who were identified prior to the study as struggling readers.

Struggling readers were students who scored at least a year below their current grade level as determined by either the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA; Beaver, 2003) or the Comprehensive Reading Inventory (CRI; Cooter, Flynt, & Cooter, 2006). Comprehensive data were collected on those 35 struggling students as a regular practice during the school year to determine progress and growth. Table 2 includes struggling student demographic information. One teacher decided not to continue participation after three weeks in the study; therefore, the data on that teacher's struggling students was not included in the demographics or the results.

Getting Started

Before the study began, we followed school district guidelines for software approval for Audacity, free recording software, which was used to record the performing readers. It was installed on all classroom computers. We also purchased an inexpensive external computer microphone for each participating classroom at a cost of about \$10 each.

Readers Theatre scripts came from purchased resources of reproducible scripts, websites from which free scripts were available, and an extensive library of scripts that could be checked out from one of the participating schools. The social studies series adopted by the district had a book of reproducible scripts that supported each unit of social studies, as did the reading series. We chose to follow Griffith and Rasinski's (2004) line of thinking about scripts in that we did not match up reading levels of scripts to reading levels of students. Teachers were encouraged to choose scripts that either supported a content area or that they thought their students would enjoy without being overly concerned with matching students to leveled scripts. The participating teachers were also encouraged to share free script findings and website resources with each other. Two of the teachers wrote their own scripts using favorite picture books from their classroom libraries. Each character's dialogue in the book became a part. The descriptions became narrator parts. The books from which scripts were written (see Table 3) became class favorites and were chosen over and over again from the classroom library.

Table 3
Script Resources

- Aaron Shepard's RT Page: www.aaronsherp.com/rt/index.html
- Adrian Bruce's Free Educational Resources: www.adrainbruce.com/theatre/plays.htm
- Stories to Grow By: www.storiestogrowby.com/script.html
- Teaching Heart: www.teachingheart.net/readerstheatre.htm
- Timeless Teacher: www.timelessteacherstuff.com

Note. You may also visit your favorite search engine and search for free Readers Theatre scripts, or purchase books filled with high-quality scripts.

Time/Rhythm

The 10-week study lasted from October 2007 through January 2008. Included during that time frame were three weeks of holiday breaks: one week for Thanksgiving and two weeks for Winter Break. Reading comprehension data were collected through pretests administered before the start of the project. Parental permission was obtained. We were able to compare our 10-week time frame to the previous Readers Theatre research gains, which we used as a baseline for this study (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999).

Students were divided into small, heterogeneous groups of four to eight, depending on the number of parts in their script. In one classroom, all students used the same script for that week. In most classrooms, each small group performed a different script chosen and distributed by the teacher. The goal was to build the Readers Theatre project into the natural rhythm of the classroom in a 10- to 15-minute time frame each day.

During the study, the students and teachers followed a weekly routine. On Monday, new scripts were given to groups, parts were assigned, and students read over them on their own. Tuesday through Thursday, students practiced the scripts in their small groups. During this practice time, the teacher might model prosodic reading of various parts and monitor practice sessions, but most often the groups practiced on their own while the teacher met with small groups for targeted instruction. Friday, each group recorded its script and created the mp3 file that was saved to the hard drive of the computer. Some classes did this as a small-group activity with the teacher while other students quietly worked on other literacy activities, such as independent reading, independent

writing, or word work. Other classes recorded each small group while the rest of the class participated as the audience, but the performing readers were focused on the computer recording, not their classmates. (See Figure 2 for an overview of the Readers Theatre process.)

Recording

Initially, we placed the external microphone on a stand in the center of the group. As we experimented with the sound quality, we found it best when each speaker spoke directly into the microphone. The students also monitored their volume by watching the sound waves produced by their voice on the computer display. In most classrooms, the teacher moved the microphone to the performer, but in some third-grade classrooms, the students took over all the production.

The participating teachers e-mailed the file to a district technology employee who then posted the audio files to the district Readers Theatre website. (This step has now been replaced by teachers uploading the files directly to their own website or blog.) The website address for the Readers Theatre podcasts was made available to all the parents. Parents could listen to all the podcasts, which were identified only by classroom teachers' and performing group's names. The students knew which group was theirs. This indirect anonymity made obtaining parental permission to participate easier. (Figure 3 offers Audacity recording tips.)

Design/Data Collection and Analysis

This was a mixed-methods study. Quantitatively, we examined reading fluency and comprehension scores of the 35 struggling students before and after

Figure 2
Readers Theatre Process

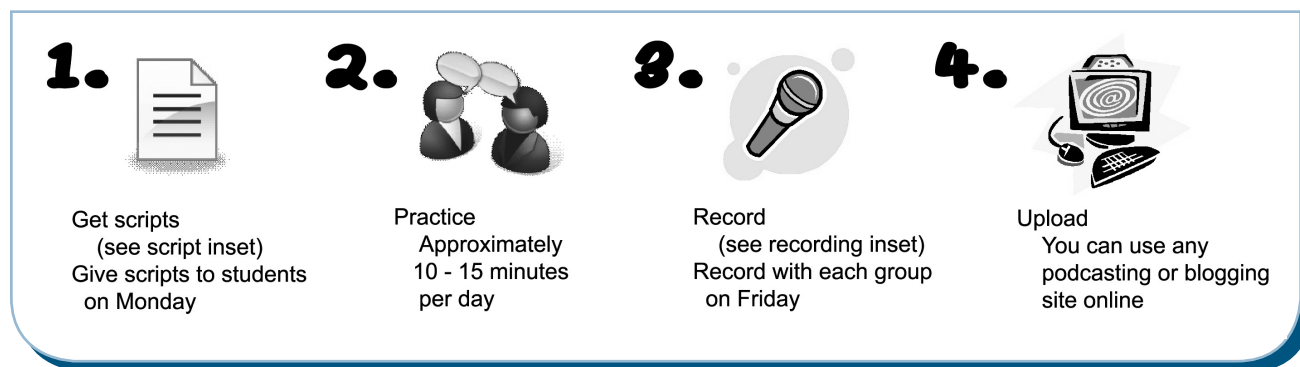
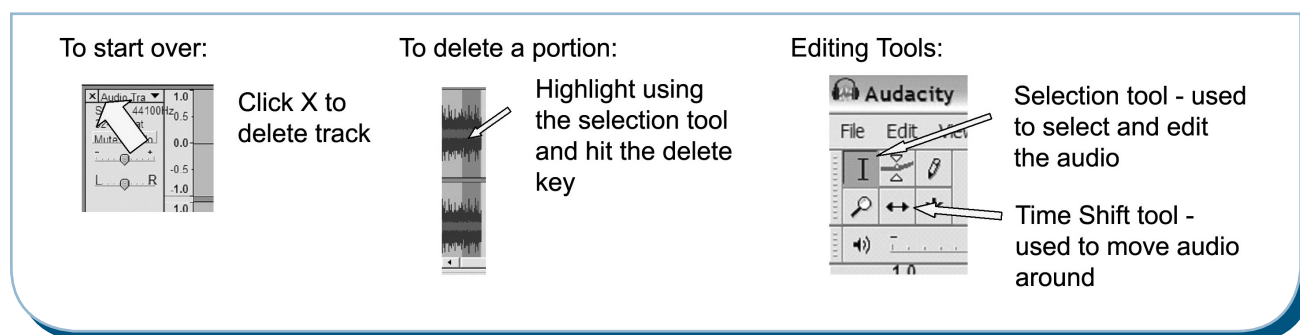


Figure 3
Audacity Editing Tips



the intervention. Teachers used either the DRA or the CRI. Both assessments were accepted because one school was already required to use the DRA assessment. We were sensitive to the time demands teachers face in implementing an intervention; therefore, all aspects, including assessment, needed to fit into the rhythm of the classroom.

Qualitatively, we conducted student focus group interviews and asked teachers to complete an open-ended questionnaire. The student focus group interviews were conducted at each school. Teachers were asked to identify one struggling reader, one on-target reader, and one advanced reader for the focus group. Because each school had two participating classrooms, each focus group consisted of six students and was facilitated by the two researchers. Students were asked open-ended questions that led them to reflect on the Readers Theatre work. Each student was given the opportunity to answer each

question. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed for coding using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consensus was developed on any coding disagreements through discussion to determine which code was most appropriate (Boyatzis, 1998).

Teachers were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire to reflect on their experiences and the benefits and drawbacks they perceived from the study. The questionnaire was e-mailed to the teachers. Most of the teachers wrote their responses and returned the questionnaire via e-mail. One teacher was interviewed directly. (See Table 4 for a selection of teacher responses.) The teacher who did not fully participate in the study did not return her questionnaire. The questionnaires we received were analyzed and coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), similar to the student focus group transcripts.

Table 4
Sample Responses to Teacher Questionnaire

| Topic | Responses |
|-----------|--|
| Scripts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ "Finding scripts was so incredibly easy. There are so many resources on the Internet...." ■ "To this day, <i>Double Trouble in Walla Walla</i> is the most checked out book in my class, thanks to the fun script it made back in the first semester." ■ "Don't be afraid to do scripts that you think are too hard for your students; they will rise to your expectations." |
| Tips | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ "Allow extra time on Mondays to read the script to the class modeling expressive reading." ■ "Make two copies of the scripts for each student so they can keep one at home and one at school." ■ "Teach the students how to tape on their own. It saves lots of time in the end." ■ "Let the kids be creative on their own and come up with their own ideas." |
| Surprises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ "I was extremely surprised to see how much they had improved with only two days of practice.... The difference between my readers and nonreaders is barely noticeable...." ■ "Struggling readers were excited to practice and wanted big parts each week." ■ "I noticed that some of my less confident readers would check out that book several times over the next few weeks...." ■ "Not only has it helped my lower readers, but it has introduced my students to new authors and it has allowed me to tie in my RT with whatever lessons we are learning in other subjects." ■ "There are scripts that correspond to just about every objective/theme we were studying." ■ "I found putting students together with similar interests was far more powerful." ■ "How engaged the students were in this type of learning." |

Results

Pretest data of initial grade-level–equivalent reading scores for the 35 struggling students had a mean of 1.09. In other words, as a group, these struggling second- and third-grade readers comprehended texts at a first-grade level. Individually, struggling students' reading levels ranged from nonreader to second-grade comprehension.

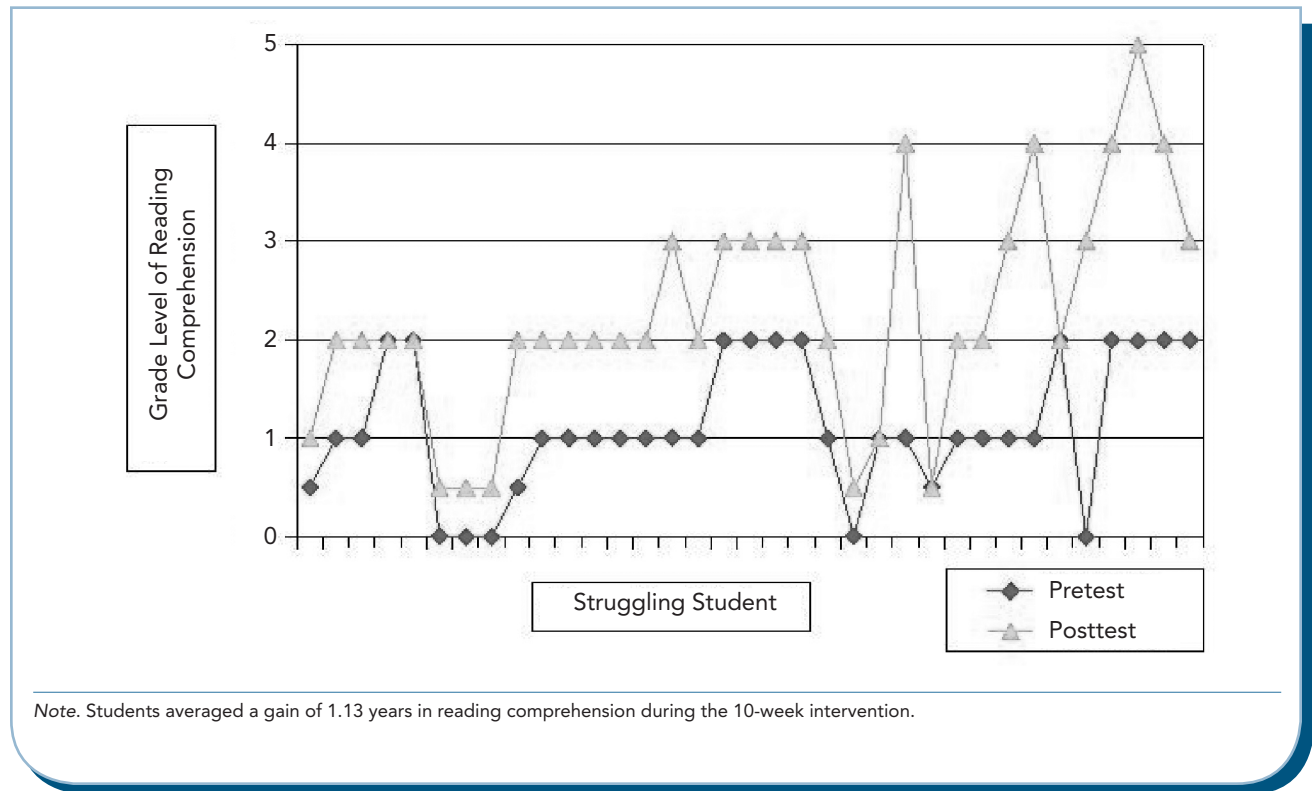
After 10 weeks of repeated reading, recording, podcasting, and listening to their own voice recordings, the post-intervention grade-equivalent reading score mean was 2.22. (Figure 4 shows pretest and posttest results.) Therefore, the average reading level for the group of struggling students was second grade. Individual student gains ranged from mid-kindergarten to fifth-grade comprehension levels. The grade-level equivalency gain for the struggling readers as a group was 1.13 years after this 10-week intervention. Gains for individual students ranged from one semester's growth to three years' growth as measured by the DRA and CRI.

Findings

Readers Theatre Benefits

Several themes were identified in the interviews that support previous Readers Theatre research findings. For example, students identified a strong theme of authenticity with the Readers Theatre work. They also spoke specifically about the benefit of repeated readings that this work offered, and they appreciated the social aspect of the work. Finally, students noted that Readers Theatre was challenging and satisfying. Teachers and students both noted that reading with expression was important and necessary with Readers Theatre and that the Readers Theatre work helped them to improve expressive reading. Teachers found that Readers Theatre fit well into the rhythm of the classroom, and they also appreciated the connection that the Readers Theatre texts can make to the content standards. As previously stated, these themes are well documented in other studies (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999).

Figure 4
Struggling Student Grade-Level Comprehension Pretest and Posttest



Technology Benefits

During the interview analyses, the data suggested three themes that are attributable to the use of technology. These themes are different from the Readers Theatre benefits in several ways. For example, these benefits have not been previously noted in research about Readers Theatre. Also, students and teachers directly attributed some of their comments to the technology, while other reflections were connected to technology by the researchers. The three themes identified were (1) having a wider audience, (2) the permanency of the work, and (3) using audio as a visualizing medium.

Wider Audience. Students and teachers both recognized that podcasting the Readers Theatre scripts and posting them online created a wider performance audience. Several students described the experience as follows: “You think that thousands

and thousands of people could be watching.” (This continued reference to watching as opposed to listening is discussed in the section “Audio as a Visual Medium.”) Most Readers Theatre performances are conducted for classmates and family members who can attend the performances during the school day. Clearly, this timing excludes many working parents as well as extended family who do not live in the close vicinity of the school.

While Readers Theatre performances without podcasting have a limited audience, podcasts are accessible from any computer with Internet access. Parents can listen at their convenience as demonstrated with the following student comment:

I ran to my dad and said we did our first Readers Theatre today and he was like, “Oh, I want to watch it,” and I gave him the paper that said the name of the website so he can listen to it and he said, “Wow, you did really good!”

The wider audience also amplified the authenticity of podcasting Readers Theatre that was noted among both students and teachers. For example, one student noted that recording the scripts and then listening to them was powerful because “it’s like being real.” This feel of authenticity was clearly connected to the technology by one student who, while discussing the difficulties of Readers Theatre, said, “I thought that thinking of how many people were watching listening [sic] to you was the hardest part.” Finally, a student was discussing how she felt about herself as a reader before Readers Theatre and after Readers Theatre. In particular, she noted the link to the technology by saying,

Before we did the Readers Theatre I felt like a kitten because I was really scared that it [posting the podcasted Readers Theatre online] was so to everyone. And after it I felt like a tiger because I kept doing Readers Theatre more.

Further, the wider audience connected students to the social aspects of Readers Theatre as they recorded and listened to their podcasts. One student noted, “It felt really good because you can make friends while you’re doing Readers Theatre, and they might say you have a good voice or something like that.” Another student compared his podcasting work to the teamwork of baseball: “It reminded me of my baseball team like we work hard to beat another team so we work hard to make it to sound good.” When one student was discussing her favorite script, it was clear that her group had recorded and listened to their work multiple times. She noted, “When I heard Stephen [who began second grade as a nonreader] say his part he used a lot of expression and he didn’t like, do like lazy expression, and that made me feel kind of surprised and stuff.” Finally, one student was discussing her feelings of nervousness as her group was recording their script. She said, “My friends, they kind of showed me how it kind of doesn’t feel nervous once you do it more and more.”

Permanency. One student summarized the importance of the permanency of the podcasts by saying, “We could just go the computer because it’s still there.” Podcasting the Readers Theatre performances created a lasting record of student work, and students used that permanency in two ways: (1) to find their voice and (2) to evaluate their own performances.

Many students commented that “hearing what you sound like” was an important part of the experience, with some noting that their voice sounded “strange” at first. One student felt happy because “you heard yourself like reading and stuff.” This careful listening inevitably led to students evaluating their own work. One student noted, “We tried again and again and then when we finally got it right, we played it and it sounded very good when we heard it.”

Self-evaluation is a critical skill, and certainly this work offered that opportunity to students (Rolheiser, 1996). Students had a clear goal of the caliber of performance they desired, as one student pointed out: “I feel good to listen to our work because it makes me feel good that we tried hard and our best to do what we had to do on Readers Theatre.” One student noted his goal this way: “I tried to read the words to get expressions in to make you feel real...to make it a strong Readers Theatre performance.” Then students discussed the process of evaluation and the accompanying emotions. One student felt it was “kind of embarrassing because if you mess up and then you hear yourself on the computer it’s kind of embarrassing.” Another student shared a range of emotions: “We kept getting all confused until we started all over and we fixed it up and we got it and we recorded it and we heard it on the big screen, it was so exciting.” Clearly, the permanency of the recording created an important opportunity for students to self-evaluate, revise, and improve their reading fluency.

Audio as Visualizing Medium. Ironically, radio producer and interviewer Ira Glass has concluded that audio is a visual medium (Abel & Glass, 1999). Certainly, while using the Audacity software during recording, the students noted the sound waves as a visual clue. One teacher observed that her “kids started noticing the sound waves on the screen and tried to make sure their volume made the waves big enough to have good volume.” Another teacher agreed, saying that her students noticed the sound waves, and “They found it useful for seeing how long their pauses were between lines! It was a good visual reminder to keep up with the group!”

However, more important, students began to discuss their Readers Theatre podcasts, for which there was no visual cuing, using visual vocabulary. For example, students talked about their podcast using language such as “watch,” “show,” “look good,” and “show my voice.” This use of visual vocabulary

to describe an auditory medium is important, because visualization is a critical comprehension strategy closely related to inferring. Visualizing is inferring in images (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), thus the oral and auditory aspect of recorded voice performances could force this visual inferring. As readers become more skilled in rapid decoding, they also become more skilled in rapid inferring supported by visualization.

Using podcasting, with all the benefits previously noted, adds depth and specificity to students' visualization. One student commented, "And when we were finished, we can hear like a video." Another student reflected further,

because if you are like saying the story without having to sit there and just read and turn the pages and look at the pictures, you kind of get excited about like just saying it and kind of like acting it out in your brain and sound out the words and it helps you a lot. I know it helped me.

Using audio as a visualizing medium is certainly a new dimension to Reader Theaters' proven comprehension benefits (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999). While this work has opened the door to this new dimension, more study is needed to develop a comprehensive, research-based theory.

Discussion

Podcasting Readers Theatre was a profoundly powerful learning experience for the students. We believe that its power came directly from the careful match of research-based strategy and well-suited technology. This matching used a strong and engaging strategy for developing readers—Readers Theatre—and enhanced it. Other matches of this specific strategy with technology have resulted in video-recording the performance. While this match had important contributions, it ultimately changed the strategy from Readers Theatre to traditional theater. The introduction of video to Readers Theatre changed it from a strategy that can be used efficiently and regularly without the interruption of regular classroom rhythms to a production that can be time-consuming. Our purpose was to keep the integrity and efficiency of Readers Theatre while enhancing it with an integration of a well-suited technology.

We have made these purposeful matches previously with similarly powerful results, including

integrating Language Experience Approach with blogging and wikis (Vasinda, McLeod, & Morrison, 2007) and math problem-solving strategies with screen casting (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009). This matching allows teachers and students to experience the power that technology can bring into the regular rhythm of the classroom. Typical classroom technologies include drill-and-practice type software that does not evoke the same type of engaging learning experience as this podcasting experience. If drill-and-practice is the only interaction teachers have with technology-integrated learning, their view of technology-rich learning is hampered and their advocacy voice for using technologies muted.

Students who interact with technology outside of school are aware of the multidimensional experiences that are available to them. However, these experiences do not always transfer easily into the rhythms of the classroom. This careful matching process is a way to bridge technologies students know from outside of school with the structure and intentions of school. This is a theme of particular interest to us that we continue to explore.

We believe using audio as a visualizing medium could be a theme of particular interest to educators. While others have noted the visual aspects of auditory mediums such as radio (Abel & Glass, 1999), research surrounding podcasting in education is still limited and needs more study. Certainly, it holds important considerations for students as a text comprehension strategy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). It can also migrate to other important academic areas as students become skilled visualizers and use the strategy with their math and science vocabulary. While Abel and Glass (1999) identified that audio produced by others can be visual, the theme certainly appeared strong with new technologies as students created their own podcasted audio. This may be an important link to facilitate visualization skills for reading more traditional texts and certainly requires more focused research.

This careful matching process is a way to bridge technologies students know from outside of school with the structure and intentions of school.

Something Old Is New Again

Overall, students in this study maintained the important benefits of traditional Readers Theatre, including authenticity and challenge. Students also maintained the critical reading comprehension gains documented by previous Readers Theatre research (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1999). Importantly, however, the Readers Theatre experience was qualitatively different for students and teachers through the use of podcasting. Both students and teachers noted the wider audience, the permanency, and also alluded to audio as a visualizing medium.

Certainly technology should not be used simply for the sake of novelty. Educators must use technology to create a learning experience that would not be possible without the technology or that is specifically suited to the technology (Kozma, 1991). In this study, we thoughtfully matched the technology to a proven literacy strategy, maintaining the integrity of the literacy strategy while enhancing it. This careful matching of strategy and technology is seen as a means to bridge the gap between the schools of today and the schools that our 21st-century students deserve (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009).

In conclusion, this study has significance for educators as we strive for authentic, technology-rich work that is meaningful and productive for students. While Readers Theatre has been a proven strategy for years, adding the podcasting dimension preserves the benefits of Readers Theatre and adds important attributes. Postman (1992) noted that technology offers a Faustian bargain in all situations. In other words, technology always provides something important but also takes something away. For example, the online world of shopping, banking, and more offers many conveniences but also takes away important face-to-face personal interactions. In this study, we found a rare exception to Postman's Faustian bargain. Podcasting Readers Theatre brought many new benefits to students but did not take away any important aspects. We believe this exception arose because of the careful matching of proven strategy with technology (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009).

Two themes that require further research emerged from this study:

1. More research and study should be devoted to the purposeful match of strategy and technology. This matching affords many benefits to students and teachers by ensuring that

research-based strategies are not lost in the transition to technology-rich work and that students are learning in a manner befitting of their 21st-century minds.

2. Research is needed on student-produced audio as a means of visualization. This work has the potential to be very important for students in many different content areas, as visualization is a key skill for students in reading comprehension, mathematics, and more. If audio, an inexpensive and easy-to-use technology, can be proven to enhance visualization, educators will have another important tool to improve the quality of learning.

Finally, we would like researchers to replicate this study in a couple of ways. First, broader samples would verify the comprehension results. Second, more qualitative studies would not only verify the themes noted in this research but also could reveal emerging themes not present or not strongly communicated in our small sample.

Note

This research was supported by the Texas Association for the Improvement of Reading 2007–2008 research grant and by a 2007–2008 grant from the Foundation for Allen Schools.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- “Reading Idol! Bringing Readers Theatre Center Stage in Your Classroom” by Jennifer M. Nelson
- “Recording Readers Theatre: Developing Comprehension and Fluency With Audio Texts” by Deborah Kozdras and James L. Welsh

IRA Books

- *Creating Strategic Readers: Techniques for Developing Competency in Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension* by Valerie Ellery
- *Essential Readings on Fluency* edited by Timothy V. Rasinski

IRA Journal Articles

- “Implementing Readers Theatre as an Approach to Classroom Fluency Instruction” by Chase Young and Timothy Rasinski, *The Reading Teacher*, September 2009
- “Podcast Time: Negotiating Digital Literacies and Communities of Learning in a Middle Years ELL Classroom” by Suzanne Smythe and Paul Neufeld, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, March 2010